

**Land Ownership Video Transcript**

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**Title:** The Homestead Act 1862-2012: Building a Home on the Frontier**Date:** April, 2011**Featuring:** Robert King, BLM Archaeologist

ROBERT. If you look at old pictures, you will see a variety of what people were using for homestead houses, and one of the things that you will notice are what appears in old photos as black covered houses. And you wonder what that is, and that was tar paper and it was a very, not very good form of insulation. It was better than nothing, to be sure, but it was a form of insulation that people would put on, generally, frame houses; one's where they were buying milled lumber from different sawmills that were not too far away. Sometimes that wood would be brought in on trains, if train lines had come in by that time.

ROBERT. That was another thing that changed homesteading enormously was the transportation availability. You go back to the earliest days of homesteading and it turns out that, well what was the way people were traveling? They were going by wagon, but then later on people well, they could come even by car in the 1910s and '20s.

ROBERT. Certainly the last major flair of homesteading, which was in Alaska, people would come in by trailers. They would actually... at times it counted in Alaska to be living in your trailer that you brought up on the Alaska highway, which was open in 1947. People came up in caravans from California and other places, dragging trailers to homestead in Alaska, and they found where available land was possible to homestead and they put their trailer down and that counted as a habitable dwelling.

ROBERT. In the eastern parts of the Dakotas, the eastern parts of Nebraska, you had sufficient timber that people were harvesting the timber and using that to build their homestead houses.

ROBERT. By the time you get up onto the plains, well what do you have? You didn't have timber, so they used what was available. They were actually able to create sod houses, taking up the sod in big blocks and stacking it up, which actually worked probably even better than the wooden houses because it was much better insulated.

ROBERT. And you had sod houses in even in north central Kansas. I'm familiar with cases like that. My own family had a sod house when they were homesteading in north central Kansas, and other families did too. And as the families moved to different areas, as homesteading progressed to different areas, then people would use what was available.

ROBERT. I'm sure that the elements have accentuated the draftiness and the holes, but there's accounts by homesteaders, that's one of the fun things now that you can find memoirs by homesteaders writing their later years of their experiences or their families or sometimes their grandchildren reconstructing their experiences, but one of the common threads in almost all of that literature is how uncomfortable some of those houses were, because they were built, usually with a minimum amount of money, and so you get what you pay for, and they didn't have very good insulation at the time. Even dwellings in towns were not insulated. The concept of filling your walls with cellulose or something else that would be a filler that we do today, that was different.

ROBERT. It used to be thought that it was healthful to have houses with lots of drafty circulation. Well the epitome of that were homestead houses out on the plains and elsewhere where they had minimal supplies, they had minimal money to bring in good wood, they would do some things to help those structures, that is to say they would bank up earth around the lower portion of those structures so that the drafts, the winter storms, and the winds, wouldn't sweep through them quite as much.

ROBERT. But even the homestead accounts that I have read, you can see accounts where snow has actually sifted through the roof or the walls during the night, and the people will wake up with snow on their beds. So, the houses were more like shacks, and oftentimes you will see the term homestead shack, and that's not an under exaggeration. Many of them were shacks at the time. Some of them, later on, the families, if they stayed on those tracts of land, they would build better houses, and it was not uncommon for the homestead house to become an animal house and sometimes a chicken coop."

ROBERT. I'm afraid our standards today, including my own, I would find that most unacceptable.

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